Libby - Press

Asbestos' death toll climbs in scenic Montana town as EPA struggles with vast cleanup effort

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EPA and Montana environmental officials say that because of their efforts, the air in Libby and the surrounding area is cleaner today.

"What we want to do on the ground will effectively break the exposure pathway," said EPA spokesman Ted Linnert. "It can be the most toxic thing on earth, but no one can be exposed to it."

But the asbestos isn't gone. It lingers behind kitchen walls in the modest houses lining Libby's quiet back streets, just beneath the surface of backyards, at the town park, where a small "No Trespassing" sign is all that separates a picnic area from contaminated ground.

It's also in the trees — tens of thousands of acres of ponderosa pine, larch and lodgepole pine that blanket the surrounding mountain landscape. Logging was long the community's lifeblood, centered at the 1,200-worker Stimson mill, shuttered in 2006 after the forestry industry contracted.

Loggers who worked the area when the mine and mill were active tell stories of dust plumes rising from felled trees. Over time, scientists say, countless asbestos fibers buried themselves in the bark.

Along the BNSF railroad line — used to ship vermiculite in open ore cars to Grace processing plants across the country — University of Montana researchers have tallied trees with 19 million fibers per gram of bark. One tree close to the mine has more than 500 million fibers per gram.

Still, when asbestos worries first arose, Grace workers who eventually became sick were among the company's fiercest defenders.

City Councilman D.C. Orr, who worked as a contractor at the mine for almost two decades, recalls joining with others at the mine to eat raw vermiculite as a way to mock the health concerns raised by activists like Benefield.